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UNCLAS VIENNA 000738

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS (VIKMANIS-KELLER) AND INR/EU

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [AU](#)

SUBJECT: FPO SACKS RIGHT WINGERS AFTER ELECTION LOSSES

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Freedom Party (FPO) executive board decided on March 7 to strip prominent right-wingers of party offices. In a reaction to severe losses last weekend in local elections in the state of Lower Austria, the leadership also tasked a six-person reform committee with "renewing" the party. Just hours after the meeting, Carinthian Governor Haider repeated his proposal to found a new FPO at a special convention to take place in late spring. The purging of the FPO's far-right faction represents a temporary victory for the pro-coalition party leadership under party chair Haubner and Vice-Chancellor Gorbach. However, if the string of FPO losses in state elections continues later this year, the outlook is for continued volatility and further friction with Chancellor Schuessel's People's Party (ÖVP). End summary.

12. (SBU) In municipal elections in the state of Lower Austria on March 6, the FPO lost more than half its previous support, falling to fourth place, behind the Greens. This was the 11th consecutive electoral defeat for the party since it entered the federal government in 2000, with the sole exception of Carinthia, where Joerg Haider retained the post of governor in March 2004.

13. (SBU) In reaction, an overnight crisis meeting of the party's executive board on March 7 decided to sack rightist critics from party posts. Party leaders removed two notorious nationalists from the board, FPO ombudsman Ewald Stadler and the party's sole Member of the European Parliament, Andreas Moelzer. FPO Vienna chairman Heinz Christian Strache kept his slot on the board, but had to step down as one of party leader Haubner's two deputies. Haubner justified the decision by citing the rightists' ongoing criticism of the party leadership. She issued a thinly veiled warning of further measures if the right does not cease its sniping. The FPO leadership also installed a six-person reform committee composed of Haubner, Haider, Gorbach, parliamentary caucus leader Herbert Scheibner, party manager Uwe Scheuch, and Vienna caucus leader Hilmar Kabas, tasking it with a sweeping "renewal" of the party.

14. (SBU) Just hours later, Haider proposed convening a special convention in late spring for the purpose of founding "a new FPO." For several months, Haider has mused publicly over a concept for a "cool, relaxed, youthful" new movement. Haider suggested that the current FPO government team, the majority of FPO legislators and most state chapters would "switch over" to the new FPO -- leaving behind all those who would not fit in with the new party. This would ensure a continuation of the FPO participation in government, he argued. His sister, FPO chairperson and Social Affairs Minister Ursula Haubner, has not yet commented on Haider's latest plan.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The purge of FPO far-right faction represents a temporary victory for the FPO party leadership, which remains publicly committed to the coalition with the ÖVP. It silences, for the time being, internal party critics who have increasingly advocated an opposition role for the FPO instead of continued government participation. Haider evidently views the disempowerment of the unruly rightwingers as the prelude to a new beginning. After decimating party liberals just a few months ago, Haider now seeks effectively to lop off the other wing of the party. A new and improved FPO centered on Haider's personality faces uncertain prospects, at best. Odds are that this FPO will fare badly in state elections in Styria, Burgenland and possibly Vienna in autumn 2005.

Brown